

Interests in Peace

International endorsement of the Vietnam peace agreements and the rapid resolution of the block on releasing American war prisoners are reassuring signs that North Vietnam, as well as the United States, continue to regard the Jan. 27 cease-fire arrangements as serving their best national interests.

Summaries of the Paris peace conference documents—the formal text will be published today—suggest that only the barest minimum of outside guarantees of peace could be agreed upon. As a British delegate warned, “no document, no words, indeed no conference can insure the maintenance of peace in Vietnam.” Continued perception of straightforward national interest on all sides, therefore, remains the most dependable force for making the Paris agreements stick.

Perhaps it was indeed just a misunderstanding by the North Vietnamese representatives in Saigon that delayed this week's scheduled release of 142 more American servicemen, as Hanoi is now explaining. Whatever the reason for the hold-up, the quick and firm reaction of the Nixon Administration was clearly beneficial in keeping the American disengagement process moving.

There is every reason, unfortunately, to expect the North Vietnamese leaders to continue their exploitation of the remaining prisoners under their control. These men stand as the last potent bargaining chips for inducing rigid United States adherence to the terms of the cease-fire. The Administration and Congress must tread carefully in the next thirty days, or until the last prisoner is at liberty, to avoid new ruptures over such touchy issues as the American commitment on future aid to Indochina.

Secondly, the Administration has every justification for exerting pressure on President Thieu, as it apparently has done in recent days, to conduct his dealings with the North Vietnamese representatives in more of the spirit of “national reconciliation and concord” which the Paris agreements rather simplistically prescribe.

Finally, the character of the future American presence in South Vietnam, a subject about which the Administration has been strangely reticent, could raise serious doubts in Hanoi about the totality and sincerity of the American withdrawal.

The United States rightly expects North Vietnam to honor all the obligations of the Paris agreements, and vice versa. Once suspicions of deception get about, either side might begin to question whether the thin fabric of truce is in its national interest after all. At that dangerous moment a technical difficulty in the process of releasing the prisoners would not be so easily resolved.